

Bertram Kaschek
Face to Face:
Christian Borchert's Artist Portraits
from 1975/76

In February 1977, the head of the Dresden Kupferstich-Kabinett Werner Schmidt committed to buy 70 *Artist Portraits* by the photographer Christian Borchert (1942–2000) who had visited about 200 artists in the GDR and taken their likenesses in the two years previous.¹ Schmidt's acquisition is a milestone in the Kabinett's history of collecting photography; it was the first time that such an extensive body of work had been purchased from a contemporary photographer.² Accordingly, the acquisition indicates a newly awakened interest in photography as an artistic means of expression – at the Dresden Kupferstich-Kabinett and beyond. In the preceding years, Schmidt had occasionally bought photographic portraits of artists but never in large quantities and always at very low prices – indicating their mere documentary value. In the case of Borchert, however, Schmidt paid the relatively high price of 2000 Marks for the whole set. Moreover, he not only purchased portraits of visual artists, whose work was part of the Kabinett's collection of prints and drawings; he also acquired a good number of images of poets and writers (about a third of the portraits) all in a format of 30 cm by 20 cm.

At the time of Schmidt's purchase, Borchert had reached the age of 35, relatively old for an artistic newcomer. For this reason, it must have been all the more important for him that his *Artist Portraits*, his first big project as a freelance photographer, found their way into a major museum so quickly. The Kupferstich-Kabinett's acquisition not only demonstrated Schmidt's personal approval but also reflected the institutional respect and recognition that Borchert had certainly been striving for. His career up to this point had developed slowly but with a remarkable persis-

1 Cf. Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (SLUB), Handschriftensammlung, Mscr. Dresd. App. 28022237 (1). Also see Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (ed.), *Bildnisse aus der DDR. Graphik, Zeichnungen und Photographien* (Erwerbungen 35), Dresden 1979.

2 For the early history of collecting photographs at the Kupferstich-Kabinett, see A. Matthias (ed.), *KunstFotografie. Katalog der Fotografien von 1839 bis 1945 aus der Sammlung des Dresdner Kupferstich-Kabinetts*, Berlin 2010.

tency.³ Born in Dresden in 1942, Borchert started taking photographs at the age of twelve and continued as an amateur all through his high school and college years. After studying «Kopierwerktechnik» (technology of the film-processing laboratory) at the film academy in Potsdam, he worked as an engineer for reproduction technology in Wolfen, Potsdam and Berlin (1963–1970). He was hired as the main photographic contributor for the highly official and abundantly illustrated photo documentation of the Nationale Volksarmee (NVA), which was issued under the title *Ich schwöre* (I swear) by the German Army Museum (Deutsches Armeemuseum) in 1969. From 1970 until 1975, he worked as a photo reporter and an engineer for colour reproductions for the *Neue Berliner Illustrierte* (NBI), the colour magazine with the highest circulation in the GDR. While working at the NBI, he enrolled in an academic «Fernstudium» (correspondence course) for photography at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (HGB) in Leipzig. Due to his growing dissatisfaction with his often rather dull tasks (for instance, title image «Girl bites into apple», NBI 36/1973), he decided to quit his job at the NBI shortly after finishing his studies in late 1974. Borchert began working freelance in April 1975, and he was eager to work exclusively on projects of his personal interest. Despite his frustration with popular mass media, however, he never gave up his ambition to reach a larger public in print. Tracing his career from its beginning up to this point, we see a growing professional self-confidence accompanied by increasing artistic ambition.

In this article, I will investigate the aesthetic, social and political implications of Christian Borchert's first freelance project, the aforementioned *Artist Portraits* from 1975/76, which so far has never been subject to detailed scholarly analysis. In the context of a volume on «Photography under Dictatorships of the Twentieth Century» that addresses «Public Spheres and Photographic Practices», I will concentrate on how Borchert, working in a totalitarian system, which attempted to socialize, profile and control public discourse, made use of photography as a medium of negotiation between the private and the public, between individual aspirations and official ideals, and between art and politics.⁴ Through subtle means of black and white, Borchert tried to voice his own view of being an artist in the GDR. By looking more closely at the formation, distribution and reception of his project, I will argue that Borchert's eagerness to work in an autonomous, self-determined way was counterbalanced by his timidity and his desire for social stability.

3 For a general survey of Borchert's life and career, see K. Leiskau, «Bilder gegen das Zeitverschwinden. Der Fotograf Christian Borchert», in: J. Bove (ed.), *Christian Borchert. Fotografien 1960–1996*, Dresden 2011, 8–13.

4 For a helpful introduction to this particular topic, see A. Vowinckel/M. Wildt, «Fotografie in Diktaturen. Politik und Alltag der Bilder», in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 12

(2015), 197–209. For recent general surveys on photography in the GDR, see N. Freeman/M. Shaul (eds.), *Do Not Refreeze. Photography behind the Berlin Wall*, Manchester 2007; U. Domröse (ed.), *Geschlossene Gesellschaft. Künstlerische Fotografie in der DDR 1949–1989 – The Shuttered Society. Art Photography in the GDR: 1949–1989*, Bielefeld 2012; S.E. James, *Common Ground. German Photographic Cultures across the Iron Curtain*, New Haven, London 2013.

1. The Formation of the Project

Borchert started his project during his last month under contract with the NBI. He never commented extensively on the reasons for his choice of subject, but it is not too difficult to imagine a number of factors that, when combined, were crucial for his decision. First and foremost, there is the fact that up to this point, portraiture was Borchert's most successful photographic exercise. In his diploma certificate from 12 December 1974, it is the only subject that he passed with grade «1» (A, very good or excellent).⁵ Secondly, he had received a lot of public attention for *Gesichter zwischen Donau und Theiß* (Faces between Danube and Tisza), his contribution to the group exhibition *Wir stellen junge Fotografen vor* (We Introduce Young Photographers) in the East-Berlin Public Library in the fall of 1974.⁶ Thus, in early 1975, portraiture must have seemed like a natural choice for Borchert's first freelance project.

Another major factor that spurred Borchert's predilection for portraiture was his admiration of August Sander (1876–1964), who was well-known within the photo community of the GDR during this period.⁷ Berthold Beiler, the leading East German photo theorist who was teaching aesthetics at the HGB in the 1970s, had written about Sander in a series of articles in *Fotografie*, the leading photo journal of the GDR (edited by the Zentrale Kommission für Fotografie within the Kulturbund der DDR), beginning in 1963.⁸ Beiler championed Sander's pictorial language in portraiture as a bourgeois, but ground-breaking and still meaningful model for the representation of «typical characters in a socialist society».⁹ Sander's working method of establishing comparative series and his sociographic ambition of registering specific types that represent a certain stratum of society was certainly a central reference point for Borchert's project.

For Borchert, however, Sander was not the only relevant model around 1973. He also was very fond of Irving Penn – a photographer explicitly dismissed by Beiler for supposedly turning Sander's humanist concerns into a «farce».¹⁰ Borchert later came to dislike the «superficial» effects of wide-angle portraiture too, but at this early point,

5 SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 871.

6 G. Ihrke, «Gesichter zwischen Donau und Theiß», in: *Fotografie* 5 (1975), 28–33. Ihrke's review, which was accompanied by several of Borchert's pictures, provoked many letters to the editor, some of which were then published in a later issue: *Fotografie* 10 (1975), 2–3. Borchert had already published some «Porträts in Farbe» in: *Fotografie* 2 (1973), 24–25, which were discussed in a later issue: *Fotografie* 7 (1973), 2–3.

7 Cf. K. Röhl, *Die Rezeption der Bildnisfotografie August Sanders in der DDR* (Master's thesis, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn 2004), 43. In 1973, Walter Borchert, Christian's uncle from Hannover, had sent a copy of Sander's *Menschen*

ohne Maske to his nephew. This book contains a long chapter on «painters, sculptors, musicians, composers, actors, writers, architects». On the reception of Sander in the GDR, also see James, *Common Ground*, 196–206.

8 B. Beiler, «August Sander und sein deutsches Panoptikum», in: *Fotografie* 9 (1963), 332–336, 355; B. Beiler, «Das fotografische Bildnis des werktätigen Menschen in Geschichte und Gegenwart (I–III)», in: *Fotografie* 5–7 (1971), 14–17 (5, I), 18–21 (6, II), 14–17 (7, III).

9 Beiler, «August Sander», 355. All translations from German sources in this article are mine.

10 *Ibid.*

he was fascinated by Penn's suggestive images and emulated his style¹¹ – probably in order to formally underline his artistic ambition. Accordingly, his aspiration to become an artist himself must have also been a major determining factor for his subject choice. Borchert came from a petit-bourgeois working class background – his father was a saddler and his mother a tailor. For him, the large-scale project of the *Artist Portraits* opened up the opportunity to gain insight into a milieu that was as foreign to him as it was attractive. Working on this project allowed him not only to take the pictures that he had in mind but also to study the habitus and lifestyle of a wide variety of different artists in order to find his own position in this field. Interestingly, he did not take portraits of other photographers in these first two years – maybe because their status as artists was not sufficiently established at this point.

According to his minutely ordered and carefully labelled photo archive, which is held today (18 years after his untimely death) by the Deutsche Fotothek in Dresden, Borchert started intense work on his *Artist Portraits* in the middle of March 1975. In this year, he took pictures of more than 110 artists, and more than 80 artists would follow in 1976. By the end of March 1975, Borchert had already visited eleven artists for extensive portrait sessions, including legendary and elder figures such as Charlotte E. Pauly in Berlin and Wilhelm Rudolph in Dresden, as well as younger, lesser-known artists including Hans-Otto Schmidt and Jürgen Raul, both of whom were based in Berlin.¹² Borchert started his project with great vigour. In April, his first full month as a freelancer, he portrayed at least 21 artists, sometimes even two in one day. He began with mostly painters and sculptors, but from mid-June onwards, writers, composers and movie directors also appear among the portrayed.

It is not easy to determine how Borchert came to choose which artists he photographed since at this early point, he barely knew any of them personally. With respect to painters and sculptors, Borchert probably took some inspiration from Lothar Lang's *Begegnungen im Atelier (Encounters in the Studio)*, which had just come out in the beginning of 1975. In fact, most of the artists who were portrayed by Borchert in this volume were still alive in 1975, indicating that Borchert aimed to achieve something like a purely pictorial version of Lang's literary portraits. Each of Lang's reportages was accompanied by a photographic likeness of the respective artist. However, these images by various photographers were not consistent in their format and quality, so Borchert might have seen the opportunity to develop a visually coherent alternative with a clear conceptual, stylistic setup.

The contact sheets from the early phase of the project betray Borchert's initial uncertainty about the specific shape his series was supposed to take. The formal

¹¹ Script of an interview, which P. Pachnicke and J. Voigt taped with Borchert in October 1980. SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 2115 (1–13), here (2).

¹² All of the portraits discussed in this article are easily accessible at www.deutschefotothek.de (by name search).

concept for the emerging series was not fixed from the start. In the case of Wilhelm Rudolph, for instance, whom he visited on 31 March, he shot at least as many pictures in a horizontal format as in the vertical one. Apparently, it took a couple months for Borchert to clearly decide on the consistent use of the upright format that would eventually become one of the key characteristics of his series. When he went to photograph Hermann Glöckner in his studio in Dresden-Loschwitz on 23 May, he exclusively took pictures in the upright format. These contact sheets also reveal how time-consuming and exhausting these portrait sessions must have been for the photographer and the models alike – especially for the elderly ones. Often Borchert took more than a hundred shots of varying poses and in different settings in one session, and of these, he would usually choose just one or two as being worthy of display.

Apart from the vertical format, the images from this series share a number of other features. Following a general trend in the 1970s, Borchert printed his photographs with a thin black border derived from the negative that was meant to frame the image and visually authenticate the shot as unclipped.¹³ Borchert's portraits keep a safe distance from their subject – many show the person standing in three-quarter length, some even in full length. When the person portrayed is seated, her or his knees are mostly (but not always) visible. All of the portraits are taken in daylight and printed in high-contrast while maintaining a subtle graduation of tonal values. Most significantly, all of the people portrayed look directly into the camera – and consequently at the beholder of the image.

In combination, format, framing, distance, lighting and eye contact make Borchert's portrait style of the mid-1970s very recognizable, even if backgrounds and «props» sometimes vary strongly. The latter speaks for Borchert's intention to integrate the surrounding space, be it inside or outside, into the image as a symptomatic factor of portraiture. As it seems, he tried to characterize his models not only by their physiognomy but also by their self-chosen environment and the objects within it. In the case of a painter like Hans Jüchser or a sculptor such as Fritz Cremer, we acquire a view of their workshops in order to grasp something of the clear constructive spirit or the creative chaos of their respective art production processes. The painter and graphic artist Werner Wittig, on the other hand, is shown on the terrace of his wooden house – one can only guess that the large window behind him belongs to his studio. And in the case of Gerhard Altenbourg, who looks like a mild protestant minister when positioned in front of the leafage of his overgrown garden, any hint of his artistic handwork is carefully avoided. Physiognomy, body posture, and clothing seem to express an ascetic ethereal quality that is emphasized by the contrast with the rampant explosion of nature around him.

13 Cf. U. Stahel, «High Contrast, Coarse-Grained and Grimy...», in: U. Domröse (ed.), *Geschlossene Gesellschaft*, 319–321.

Such a displacement from the site of production is present in virtually all of Borchert's writer's portraits. Almost none of the authors is shown at a desk, none has a pen or a typewriter within reach. Wulf Kirsten and Heinz Czechowski appear to be standing in front of overgrown rock formations, displaying an outlaw attitude. Equally challenging, Klaus Schlesinger takes a stand on a roof in a craggy Berlin courtyard. Calm and modest, Erwin Strittmatter is shown sitting on the small staircase in front of his house, both feet on the ground, his elbows resting on his knees and his hands folded. Peter Hacks, in turn, seated himself proudly in the castellated courtyard of his property. With his leisurely crossed legs, the rolled-up sleeves of his sweater and his large Aristide-Bruant-shawl, he represents a perfect blend of aristocratic sprezzatura, bourgeois complacency and bohemian coolness. Placed in a folding chair against the backdrop of a white wall, Heiner Müller emanates modernist reduction and radicalness. Hermann Kant, at this point the vice-president of the GDR writers' association, is one of the very few writers who appear at a desk, a waste-paper basket in reach and his head positioned between a lampshade and a historical marine chart of the Baltic Sea next to a reproduction print of Vermeer's *View of Delft*.

The images presented here raise the question of specific staging and thus of the performative dimension of Borchert's *Artist Portraits*. In order to better understand the photographer's intention and approach, we have to take a step back and see the *Artist Portraits* as a continuation of his previous project, the aforementioned *Gesichter zwischen Donau und Theiß*, which helped the artist form his particular idea of contextual portraiture. For a study project at the HGB, Borchert had travelled to Hungary three times in 1972 and 1973 in order to shoot portraits of anonymous people in the street and in shops, workshops and institutions. His goal was not street photography in the sense of the perfect snapshot. On the contrary, he was looking for images that demonstrated that their subjects had given their explicit consent. For this purpose, he approached as many people as possible with a small note written in Hungarian, asking them if they would be willing to have their photograph taken by him in a pose of their own choosing. In this way, he made a pact with his subjects; he wanted them to be partners with equal rights in the image-making process so that both parties would be responsible for the pictorial result. The direct gaze into the camera functions as the guarantee that this pact is also evident to the beholders of the photographs (fig. 1).

Borchert was completely overwhelmed by the openness of his Hungarian image partners, and it helped him overcome his own initial timidity.¹⁴ Of the roughly 700 people that he addressed during his three trips, only 20 did not agree to cooperate with him.¹⁵ Borchert's images from Hungary found a mixed reception in East Germany though. His strategy destroyed any semblance of true-to-life realism and

14 Interview Pachnicke / Voigt. SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 2115 (1–13), here (1–2).

15 Ihrke, «Gesichter», 31.

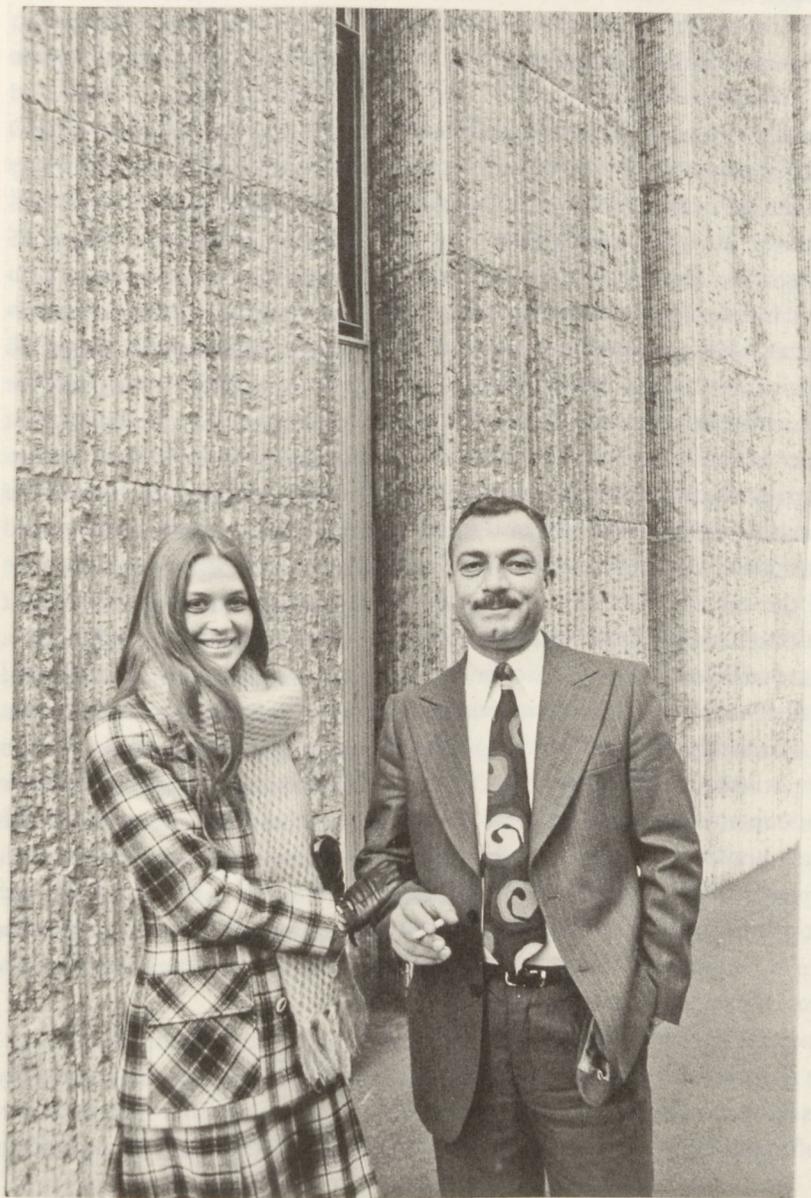


Fig. 1: Couple in front of the Hotel «Duma» in Budapest, 1972,
Gelatin Silver Print, 238 × 159 mm

Source: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Kupferstich-Kabinett,
Inv.Nr. Da 2001-15/10.

naturalness that were highly appreciated and asked for in GDR-photojournalism. Unsurprisingly, the editorial board of the *NBI* had no interest in printing them.¹⁶ When a small selection was eventually published in the journal *Fotografie* in 1975, readers responded with both applause and rejection; some complained about the absence of «liveliness».¹⁷

Borchert's goal was not only to produce a photographic image as the result of a photographic act but also to have the photograph function as a witness of this very act. The conditions of its genesis were supposed to remain visible in the image itself. This ideal shows Borchert's strong awareness of the ethical implications of the practice of photography. Moreover, it betrays a certain sociological interest in social situations.¹⁸ And in fact, Borchert's portraits from Hungary can be read as visual recordings of micro-sociological experimental arrangements, which were meant to transform a social situation into a photographic image. According to Borchert, the more or less random encounter between strangers opened up the possibility for a theatrical act of self-presentation, in which the subject shapes his/her becoming-an-image as much as possible. As a matter of fact, the question of whether the person reveals her or his «real» self or if she or he follows stereotypical patterns and prefabricated poses remains open. Due to the intrinsic theatricality of the situation in front of the camera, however, the models are actually invited to play a role. It seems that Borchert had hoped that the option of acting, which offers the model a safe retreat, would help to create a relaxed situation so that the model would reveal some authentic aspect of his or her individual character, despite his/her assumption of a role. Admittedly, it is hard to judge if the photographer succeeded with his attempt or not – mostly because the audience (in the GDR or today) does not know the anonymous models from Hungary. Yet, due to the models' direct gaze into the camera, each photo simulates a face-to-face situation that the beholder can experience as a pleasant dialogue, a neutral encounter or a hostile confrontation. In any case, photography is not only intended to create an image that informs us about the appearance of persons and things but also, and more importantly, to involve us in a dynamic social process of self-positioning.

It seems that Borchert was concerned with some of the same topics that had occupied the American sociologist Erving Goffman since the early 1950s: theatricality in the presentation of self, the social organization of gatherings and interaction orders.¹⁹ Goffman's concepts for the analysis of social situations can be applied to

16 Cf. «Gegen das Verschwinden. Matthias Flügge im Gespräch mit Christian Borchert am 13. Januar 1996», in: C. Borchert, *Zeitreise. Dresden 1954–1995*, Dresden 1996, 201–205, here 202.

17 Cf. *Fotografie* 10 (1975), 2.

18 So far, Borchert's sociological interest has mostly been discussed in connection with his *Family Por-*

traits from the 1980s and in terms of the representation of various milieus. Cf. A. Jilek, «Dokumentarische Fotografie und visuelle Soziologie. Christian Borcherts «Familienporträts» aus der DDR», in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 10 (2013), 321–330.

19 Cf. E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday*

Borchert's early portrait series – a fact that can only be hinted at in this context. More importantly, the situation of portraiture, constituted by the presence of the photographer and his model(s), can be described as a «focused interaction», that is «the kind of interaction that occurs when persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention [...]».²⁰ What I would like to focus on is what Goffman labels as «face engagement» and «personal encounter» – when eyes meet eyes. Quoting Georg Simmel, Goffman underlines the eye's «uniquely sociological function»: «The union and interaction of individuals is based upon mutual glances.» This most direct reciprocity, however, «crystalizes into no objective structure» but is only «present in the occasion and is dissolved in the function. [...] The interaction of eye and eye dies in the moment in which directness of the function is lost.»²¹ Borchert's portraits from Hungary show his keen awareness of this binding force of mutual gazes. Of course, the face-to-face encounter between the beholder of the portrait and the person portrayed is not a proper re-enactment of the original encounter between the photographer and his model since at the moment of the shot, the model's gaze addressed the lens of the camera and not the photographer's eye. Nevertheless, the pictorially induced relationship between the beholder and the person portrayed might still resemble the visual interaction that was unfolded during the process of portraiture.

It is highly unlikely that Borchert was familiar with Goffman's sociological categories. Nevertheless, he was captivated by the dynamics of social interactions and wanted to investigate their internal logic in a way that resembles Goffman's interests. Reiterating the portrait interaction more than 700 times within his total eight weeks in Hungary, Borchert unfolded a wide photographic panorama of possibilities for the presentation of self during a spontaneous face-to-face encounter. Here, he did not categorize his portraits according to types, classes or strata of society. For a book-prototype that he created together with the designer Christine Gohles, he chose 103 portraits that seem to be arranged mainly by formal criteria and do not show signs of a systematic macro-sociological order.²²

Life. New York 1959; E. Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction – Fun in Games & Role Distance*, Indianapolis 1961; E. Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*, New York 1963; E. Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, New York 1967.

20 Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, 24.

21 *Ibid.*, 93 (quoting Simmel).

22 «Gesichter zwischen Donau und Theiß. Einhundertunddrei Fotografien ungarischer Menschen von Christian Borchert», Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig 1974 (SLUB Dresden, Deutsche Fotothek, unpublished prototype without shelf mark).

2. Shaping the Artist's Image

Borchert's *Gesichter zwischen Donau und Theiß* demonstrates the photographer's deep commitment to the performative nature of portraiture that he also subsequently pursued in his *Artist Portraits*. There are, however, some critical differences between the images from 1972/73 and those from 1975/76. Whereas the former were made in the public space and show anonymous people from a foreign country, the latter were produced in the studios and living rooms of GDR artists and show major or minor celebrities of the local art scene. In case of the Hungarian project, Borchert was able to approach people ad hoc and had the chance to use their spontaneous reaction to create a striking image. With the *Artist Portraits*, in contrast, he had to contact his models in advance to ask if they would be willing to take part in his enterprise. Consequently, photographs from the *Artist Portraits*, unlike the ones from Hungary, do not register random encounters but meetings that were thoroughly premeditated from both sides. Moreover, it was clear from the beginning that this meeting was supposed to result in a photographic picture, which would coexist, and possibly compete, with the pre-existing public «image» of the respective artists – be it derived from their outer appearances or from their works. Because of this intricate setup, the *Artist Portraits* lack the playful and improvisational character of the portraits from Hungary. The moment of spontaneous curiosity gives way to a slow and cautious process of getting to know each other that was often initiated by a mailed letter.

Occasionally, Borchert had to deal with reservations on the part of his desired models, such as in the case of the writer Franz Fühmann. He answered Borchert's letter, which included several portraits of other artists, with the following statement (27 June 1976):

Your photos are certainly excellent and at the same time – maybe exactly for this reason – they are what I do not like for my own person. It is the brilliantly produced virtuosic pose – a word that sounds harsh but which I use as a terminus technicus. In ballet photography it has a completely neutral tone – the dancer and the company are «posing», and everything is clear. Moreover, I do not contest the right of any of my colleagues to make use of this art – but it goes against my grain. You set up a space, a gesture and a face and this is supposed to express something. I only accept one kind of expression of a writer and this is his books. If there is the public demand for getting an idea of his outer appearance, the effigy should be as simple as possible (there is a moment of posing also in this but it is the most minimal = for me the most optimal). It is beyond question that you deliver excellent work – it is just not my brand.²³

Borchert's response (4 July 1976) to this pretty clear rejection is a masterpiece of diplomacy and courtship. As such, it is also an impressive balancing act between

23 SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 1332.

understanding compliance and persistence that, at the same time, formulates the ethical and aesthetic maxims of his practice of portraiture:

Your letter made me happy and disappointed me since I had hoped to gain your approval by virtue of presenting you with some images. Please excuse the hard-headedness that lies in the following question: What speaks against keeping the photo plain and simple, with a minimum of posing? Every person is different from another, that's why it's important to have photos that show different people. In any case, this is what I am after; arbitrary exchangeability of background and poses would be proof of mechanical photocopying, lack of knowledge or shenanigans on the part of the photographer. For this reason, I think that your attitude has to be the foundation of my work. I do not want to act against you with my camera, at all. I very much hope to be able to change your mind – at least for a trial run or a conversation about it. You are welcome to keep the photo of Sarah Kirsch. Please send me a copy of your book *Experiences and Contradictions* in exchange. Is this possible? I have already read it but I also would like to own it.²⁴

This exchange of letters bears witness to a careful and painstaking mutual assessment, which is highly charged with hope for an appropriate pictorial outcome and fear of a failed one – quite a burden for the portrait session that Borchert desired so strongly. Borchert's assertion that he never wants to act against the person portrayed with his camera, his willingness to take Fühmann's sceptical concerns as the basis of their cooperation, his generosity about the portrait of Sarah Kirsch, and his seemingly offhand but actually quite emphatic hint that he has read Fühmann's writings, finally led the author to consent to the photographer's request. The contact sheets of their meeting (17 September 1976), the proofs and the image selected to be exhibited and sold, bear witness to the joint effort to gain a likeness «as simple as possible». In the end, Borchert (and Fühmann) decided for a portrait in which Fühmann is shown standing in three-quarter length slightly off-centre with his arms behind his back (fig. 2).

Some meters behind him, there is a pile of firewood against which a bike is leaning (only the back wheel to be seen). Barren trees fill up some of the background. Despite not being skinny, the writer appears somewhat frail – probably due to his unassertive body posture, his slightly tilted head, and his facial expression. Compared to another image that Borchert chose to print as a proof and that firmly frames Fühmann's body with the pile of wood (this time close behind him) and the vertical larch trunk on the right, the final portrait does not fix Fühmann to the picture plane. In this way, Borchert traded the stable, representative image for a loose, scattered composition in which the dispersed graphic elements find themselves in a rather precarious balance. Unfortunately, Fühmann's response to this result is not docu-

24 SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 1334.

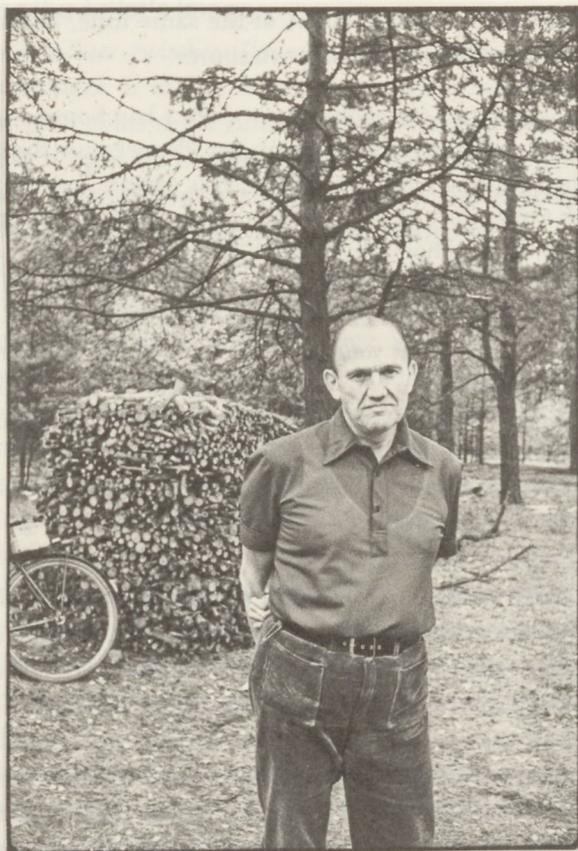


Fig. 2: Portrait of Franz Fühmann, 1976,
Gelatin Silver Print, 292×195 mm

Source: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden,
Kupferstich-Kabinett,
Inv.Nr. D 1977-50.

mented. It is safe to assume, though, that he, in principle, was content with his likeness because otherwise Borchert certainly would not have exhibited or sold it.

The letter exchanges in Borchert's estate contain many reactions of artists to their photographic likenesses, ranging from the highest praise to obligatory thanks and brusque disapproval and disparagement. The poet Reiner Kunze, for instance, remarks on his portrait: «[...] there is no doubt (concerning my wife, our very critical daughter and myself, although I do not have a voting right in this regard): the best photo ever taken of me.»²⁵ The composer Rainer Kunad likewise attests: «You are truly an artist photographer, never before someone was able to make such a beauti-

²⁵ SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 1560.

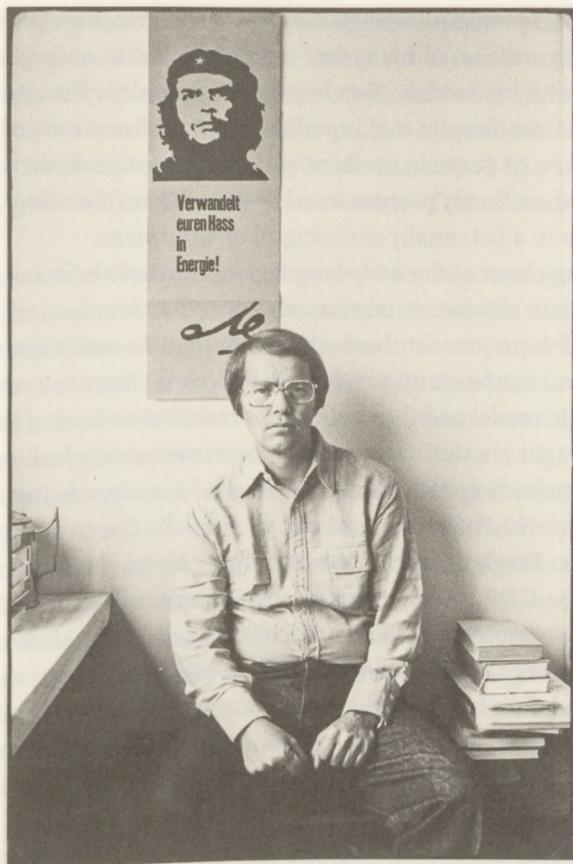


Fig. 3: Portrait of Volker Braun, 1976,
Gelatin Silver Print, 290×195 mm

Source: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden,
Kupferstich-Kabinett,
Inv.Nr. D 1977-42.

ful and meaningful portrait of mine.»²⁶ In contrast, the painter Roland Paris asks Borchert to get to know him better since he absolutely does not recognize himself in Borchert's portrait of the «gentle soft boy who I am not!»²⁷

The question of whether the portraitist is capable of grasping the individual essence of the sitter is a key one in portraiture. And as Borchert's letter to Fühmann demonstrates, he claimed this ability for himself. For this reason, Borchert usually engaged with the works of his sitters beforehand and did his best to prepare himself for a meeting. According to his own statement, however, it is the conversation during the portrait session itself that is most decisive for establishing a «consensus of

26 SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 1550.

27 SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 1741.

intentions», which eventually allows the model to open up his or her facial features for a true expression of his or her self.²⁸ In order to maintain eye contact and conversation with his models, Borchert used a tripod for his artist portraits of the mid-1970s. And yet, despite making a big point of direct eye contact, Borchert did not actually focus or zoom in on faces but always kept a safe distance from his subjects, capturing their bodily posture in relation to the surrounding space in order to place his models in a potentially meaningful environment.

Looking closer at the body language of his models, many of them seem to articulate a certain aloofness and reserve. This effect is enhanced by the fact that a good number of them present themselves with folded arms, expressing a moment of resistance and confrontation. From time to time, there is even an object positioned between the model and the camera that manifests a kind of barrier between the two in a downright physical fashion. Moreover, everyone is looking into the camera very seriously; nobody smiles. The psychological remoteness that characterizes many of Borchert's *Artist Portraits* might also be partially due to a certain difference in habitus between Borchert and his models. Roger Melis, the most important portraitist of artists in the GDR,²⁹ had grown up in an intellectual and artistic environment as the son of the prominent poet Peter Huchel and would therefore have felt in his element around writers and other artists. Unlike Melis, Borchert, with his petit-bourgeois background, first had to find his own way into the mostly enclosed artistic circles of East Germany. In this respect, some of the artists might have perceived him as an intruder – and some of this social awkwardness might have also been recorded in his photos every now and then.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe the layout of Borchert's project was an encyclopaedic one from the start. Along these lines, we might ask if Borchert, for all his effort to capture the models' individual essence, was also trying to shape a more general «image» of being an artist in the GDR. In terms of the confrontational mode of many of the *Artist Portraits*, one can say that Borchert certainly contributed to this «pathos of distance» with his choice of particular images. Looking through the countless corresponding contact sheets, it is evident that Borchert often could have chosen a more relaxed pose or a friendlier facial expression. But apparently, he was eager to lead the beholders of his portraits into intense, and often uncomfortable, face-to-face encounters. The artists are not shown as heroic figures in moments of busy productivity or inspiration. However, they are also not just presented as passive objects of observation and admiration. Rather, they appear, despite their stilled poses, as idiosyncratic, strong personalities who are looking back at the beholder, not just allowing him/her to immerse him/herself in the image but also forcing him/her to engage with them.

28 Quoted after L. Heinke, «Künstler im Porträt. Maler und Bildhauer, fotografiert von Christian Borchert», in: *Der Morgen*, 27 December 1976.

29 Cf. R. Melis, *Künstlerporträts. Fotografien 1962–2002*, ed. by M. Bertram, Leipzig 2008.

In proof prints for Volker Braun's portrait, we can even see how pose and facial expression change along with clothes and props. One proof shows him as a friendly man in a black shirt leisurely sitting under a reproduction of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* whereas the final exhibition print presents him in a light shirt with a rather grim facial expression, sitting (in the same spot) like a boxer with almost clenched fists under a Che Guevara-poster saying «Transform your hatred into energy!» (fig. 3).³⁰

So in a manner consistent with Braun's self-perception, Borchert spotlights the writer's pugnacious stamina as his dominant character trait. Similar notions of distance, doubt, defiance and distrust can be found in almost all of the portraits in the series. Again and again, Borchert emphasizes the obstinate scepticism of his models. None of them conforms to the ideal of the positive, optimistic «socialist personality», which was called for by the official doctrine.³¹

In Borchert's conceptual approach, the locations and backgrounds of the portraits were chosen or at least suggested by the models themselves. They were supposed to pick a fitting environment that could later be read as a significant or characteristic ambience. Artist studios and living rooms dominate, but there are also balconies, porches, gardens, parks and wild, natural settings. In the larger serial display of the portraits, this diversity allows for an alternation amongst spaces of labour, leisure and nature, with a wide variety of visual patterns. But all these different spaces find their common denominator in being places of retreat. Recurrently, Borchert enters a private sphere that is usually not accessible for the public. And by including the spatial environment of the models into his portraits, he not only broaches the issue of their artistic personalities but also the issue of their refuges as the condition of their artistic production. Even when the portrayed artist actually is a functionary or a representative of an official association, Borchert emphasizes the private, non-institutional dimension of being an artist.

This raises the question of whether Borchert had a more specific – possibly political – agenda with his *Artist Portraits*. At first glance, his encyclopaedic approach of covering as many living artists as possible seems to rule out the possibility that he was defending or contesting a specific canon of GDR art or literature. The spectrum of artists portrayed is not only wide but also seems to be pretty well balanced in terms of artistic and political positions. It included officially acclaimed and marginalized artists and writers alike. Socialist showcase artists such as Fritz Cremer and Walter Womacka appear next to idiosyncratic misfits including Gerhard Altenbourg

30 Volker Braun had just published his play *Che Guevara oder Der Sonnenstaat* in 1975.

31 Cf. *Gesetz über die Teilnahme der Jugend der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik an der Gestaltung der entwickelten sozialistischen Gesellschaft [...] (Jugendgesetz der DDR)* vom 28. Januar 1974,

Section I «Die Entwicklung der Jugend zu sozialistischen Persönlichkeiten». URL: <http://www.verfassungen.de/de/ddr/jugendgesetz74.htm>. For a nuanced discussion of the concept of the «socialist personality», see James, *Common Ground*, 197–199, 210–217.

and Robert Rehfeldt; «realist» painters such as Wolfgang Mattheuer and Werner Tübke find themselves next to artists with strong «formalist» leanings, for example Hermann Glöckner and Werner Wittig; non-compliant writers such as Reiner Kunze and Thomas Brasch confront advocates of the GDR system including Hermann Kant and Peter Hacks. This broad perspective is already a statement in itself, which reflects the situation of cultural politics around 1975.

The early 1970s were a period of relative relaxation in the cultural life of the GDR after years of rigid censorship. In his opening speech at the Eighth Party Convention of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) on June 15, 1971, Erich Honecker, who had replaced Walter Ulbricht as the Committee's First Secretary in May, famously encouraged the artists of the GDR to capture and exploit «the whole breadth and variety of the new expressions of life» in their works and claimed the Communist Party's understanding for the «creative search for new forms».³² Later in the same year, during the Fourth Assembly of the Central Committee (ZK) of the SED on 17 December 1971, Honecker even stated, «in the realm of art and literature, there can be no taboos» – as long as one starts from «the stable position of Socialism».³³ This crucial restriction already marks the narrow scope of Honecker's supposedly liberal attitude. However, the cultural climate seemed to thaw in the following years until it cooled down again in the second half of the 1970s.

Borchert's *Artist Portraits* mark exactly the moment before the drop of temperature. The broad spectrum of artists and writers appears to take Honecker's slogan of «breadth and variety» at its word, representing a wide range of artistic approaches that went far beyond the canon of socialist realism. But perhaps, his encyclopaedic method should also be understood as a form of camouflage that enabled him to incorporate non-conformist artists into presentations of his portraits. Since it is impossible to display the series, with its more than 200 artists, as a whole, the selections made for every exhibition create their own meaningful constellations. In case of doubt, the presence of loyal socialists would always allow Borchert to claim an impartial position for himself – but this, of course, was itself problematic in a state that championed socialist «partiality» as one of the highest political and artistic values.³⁴

3. Distribution and Reception

Borchert certainly hoped for a comprehensive presentation of his *Artist Portraits* to a larger audience from the very beginning of his project. As it turned out, however, the series was exhibited and published only partially and in fragments. The first images from the series to appear in public were portraits of movie directors, screenwriters and actors, which were published in the monthly movie-magazine *Film und Fern-*

32 *Neues Deutschland*, 16 June 1971.

33 See *Neues Deutschland*, 18 December 1971.

34 With respect to photography, see the highly in-

fluent book by B. Beiler, *Parteilichkeit im Foto*, Halle/Saale 1959.

sehen as early as September 1975. This is remarkable for two reasons; first, his photos were singled out under the rubric «Das Fotoporträt», with Borchert prominently named as the author of the image. This elevation to the status of an artistic auteur was further enhanced by the fact that Borchert had inherited this rubric from no one less than Arno Fischer, the godfather of «independent» photography in the GDR, who established the format of the «Fotoporträt» between January 1974 and July 1975 and had contributed eleven portraits to the magazine before Borchert took over. Borchert delivered a total of 25 portraits through which he was able to make himself known with his signature style. The first time some of Borchert's portraits were presented as a series was in the March volume of *Das Magazin*, when ten of his photos illustrated an article by art historian Lothar Lang about female artists in the GDR.³⁵

The first extensive presentations of Borchert's *Artists Portraits* finally took place in the second half of 1976. On 26 September, there was a one-day show of 30 *Portraits of Painters and Sculptors* in the Club der Kulturschaffenden «Johannes R. Becher» in Berlin-Mitte. Borchert's real breakthrough, however, came later in the fall with two exhibitions in Berlin, which opened within two weeks of each other: *Schriftsteller vor der Kamera* in the book shop named Das internationale Buch and *Maler und Bildhauer im Porträt* in the Galerie Berlin. The exhibition of writer portraits was particularly controversial since it opened on 18 November, that is two days after the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann was expatriated because of his «hostile demeanour towards the German Democratic Republic»³⁶ – and only one day after twelve prominent GDR-writers published an open letter criticizing the expulsion in the western press. Eight of these disobedient authors were represented in Borchert's exhibition (Christa Wolf, Erich Arendt, Jurek Becker, Sarah Kirsch, Franz Fühmann, Volker Braun, Stefan Heym, Heiner Müller) – and in the end, about half of the 39 writers portrayed in the show had signed the petition. There were, however, also authors such as Hermann Kant, Paul Wiens, Ludwig Renn, Wieland Herzfelde and Peter Hacks who defended Biermann's expulsion and criticized the singer-songwriter sharply for his political opinions and the supposedly minor quality of his poetry.³⁷

Of course, Borchert could not have anticipated this turn of events when he had started his project almost two years earlier. And he most likely did not aim at becom-

35 L. Lang, «Künstlerinnen», in: *Das Magazin* 3 (1975), 53–58. For further publications of some of Borchert's *Artist Portraits* see Zentrale Kommission Fotografie / Kulturbund der DDR (eds.), *Fotojahrbuch International 1976*, Leipzig 1976, 45–47; and H. Schumann, *Ateliengespräche*, Leipzig 1976, 87.

36 *Neues Deutschland*, 17 November 1976.

37 Hermann Kant in: *Neues Deutschland*, 20/21 No-

vember 1976; Paul Wiens, Ludwig Renn and Wieland Herzfelde in: *Neues Deutschland*, 22 November 1976; Peter Hacks in: *Die Weltbühne* 49 (1976), reprinted in: P. Roos (ed.), *Exil. Die Ausbürgerung Wolf Biermanns aus der DDR. Eine Dokumentation*, Köln 1977, 70–72. Also see R. Berbig et al. (eds.), *In Sachen Biermann. Protokolle, Berichte, und Briefe zu den Folgen einer Ausbürgerung*, Berlin 1994; C. Tannert (ed.), *Ende vom Lied*, Berlin 2016.

ing famous by virtue of a scandal. The heightened public attention, however, was certainly helpful for his freelance career. All of a sudden, he found himself and his images at the centre of the current political discourse, and virtually instantaneously, he became a famous photographer. His next show *Maler und Bildhauer im Porträt* in the prominent Galerie Berlin, which was run by the Staatlicher Kunsthandel der DDR and considered itself to be the central platform for the distribution and the discussion of contemporary art in the GDR, would stabilize his success.³⁸ Werner Schmidt's major acquisition of 70 prints for the Dresden Kupferstich-Kabinett was certainly inspired by these much-debated exhibitions.³⁹

Admittedly, there was not much of a response in the printed press. Only Lothar Heinke, Borchert's former colleague from the *NBI*, wrote a somewhat longer and positive review of the latter show for *Der Morgen*.⁴⁰ In contrast, Lothar Lang, whose *Encounters in the Studio* had been so crucial for Borchert's project and who had written positively about Borchert's portraits in his aforementioned article on female artists from the previous year, dedicated only a small, dismissive paragraph of a survey review in *Die Weltbühne* to the exhibition.⁴¹ Lang blamed Borchert for having measured diverse artists by the same «pictorial yardstick» rather than interpreting their artistic individuality with photographic means. As a handwritten note (dated 30 December 1976) in his private copy of the journal demonstrates, Borchert was deeply hurt by these allegations and understood these «malicious» remarks as the revelation of the true «spirit» of their author.⁴² One can only speculate if this «spirit» solely refers to Lang's aesthetic rejection (and Borchert's personal hurt) or if it was also meant to hint at Lang's politically compliant dismissal of a photographer who had given a pictorial stage to so many deviant and disobedient writers and artists. At this point, of course, Borchert was certainly not aware of Lang's complicity with the Ministry for State Security (Stasi).⁴³

As was hitherto unknown,⁴⁴ Borchert was also listed as a so-called IM (Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter, Unofficial Collaborator) of the Stasi from 6 March 1975 until 20

38 Cf. Staatlicher Kunsthandel der DDR (ed.), *Galerien und Werkstätten des Staatlichen Kunsthandels*, Berlin 1977, 12–13.

39 Wulf Kirsten, one of the authors portrayed, wrote to Borchert about the exhibition in *Das internationale Buch* (on 1 December 1976): «Ich habe mich gefreut, Ihr Projekt nun so vollkommen verwirklicht an der Wand der Berliner Buchhandlung zu sehen. Es wurde eifrigst betrachtet, was da ausging.» SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 1533.

40 Heinke, «Künstler im Porträt».

41 L. Lang, «Von Gotha bis Perleberg», in: *Die Weltbühne* 52 (1976), 1654–1656, here 1655.

42 SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 2235 (7).

43 See H. Offner, «Überwachung, Kontrolle, Manipulation. Bildende Künstler im Visier des Staatssicher-

heitsdienstes», in: H. Offner / K. Schroeder (eds.), *Eingegrenzt – Ausgegrenzt. Bildende Kunst und Parteilichschaft in der DDR 1961–1989*, Berlin 2000, 185–186, 229–230.

44 I owe many thanks to Hansgert Lambers who made Borchert's personal copy of his Stasi files accessible to me. Borchert had made a request for inspection of his records in 1994. He received a copy (filling one DinA4-folder) in late 1998 and, after careful inspection and annotation, handed it to his close friend Lambers sometime before his death. The quotes in this chapter refer to these files.

December 1976⁴⁵ – which is exactly the period during which he was working on his *Artist Portraits*. According to his Stasi files, however, he was always very reluctant to fulfil his tasks and never delivered information that satisfied his employers. Moreover, it seems as if he did not report on any of the artists he visited; the Stasi officers assigned to him were taken by great surprise when they found out that their informant had put together an exhibition with a great number of portraits of Biermann-supporters.⁴⁶ Beginning in May 1976, Borchert withdrew himself more and more from his Stasi assignments, and in the course of December 1976, his contract ended with mutual consent.⁴⁷ On 20 December, his employee file was closed and a new one was opened; he himself became the object of observation as a notoriously unreliable, politically unstable subject with «ties to negative and antagonistic groups of people within the GDR».⁴⁸

From this point onwards, Borchert's radius of action was noticeably limited. His portrait show in Schwedt, in which he intended to show the complete set of writers from *Das internationale Buch* complemented by a smaller selection of painters and sculptors from the *Galerie Berlin*, was monitored and curtailed by the Stasi. Borchert was forced to remove the portraits of Jurek Becker, Günter de Bruyn, Stefan Heym, Sarah Kirsch, Heiner Müller and Christa Wolf from display. At first, he insisted on presenting the complete series, with reference to the fact that it did not cause any problems in Berlin. When this claim was rejected, he almost cancelled the show. But he finally accepted the disfigurement of his original selection (which still included at least twelve signatories of the Biermann petition).⁴⁹ Interrogated by the Stasi on 3 February 1977, he claimed that he was not aware of the authors' sympathies for Biermann before his Berlin exhibition. At the same time, however, he openly maintained his conviction that the incriminated authors were «still important figures of art and culture in the GDR».⁵⁰

Borchert's political stance was characterized by a vacillation between caution and self-confident veracity.⁵¹ He never considered himself to be a regime critic or a dissident, but he always tried to find his own way and stay true to the principles that he had developed over the years. In case of greater conflict, however, he often backed off

45 The Stasi had contacted Borchert for the first time in August 1974 (after checking his references beforehand) and hustled him to become an informant for several months until he finally handed in a handwritten consent on 6 March 1975 (BStU 000048).

46 BStU 000008, Sachstandsbericht Borchert, Christian, 20 December 1976.

47 According to a Stasi report («Treffbericht») from 6 January 1977, Borchert referred to his «clear conscience» and other «meaningless reasons» again and again in order to justify his refusal to cooperate with the Stasi any longer. BStU 000043.

48 BStU 000006, Übersichtsbogen zur operativen Personenkontrolle, 20 December 1976. The goal of this operation was to determine the «nature and character of these ties».

49 BStU 000187–190, IMV «Benjamin», Bericht zur Fotoausstellung Borchardt [wrong spelling in the document], 31 January 1977.

50 BStU 000191–192, Ult. Heisler, Bericht über ein Gespräch mit der OPK-Person «Fotograf».

51 On 18 June 1999, Borchert attached a small humble note to his personal Stasi files, saying: «Auch ich war kein Held.» (I was also not a hero.)

in order to avoid impasses that would prevent him from doing or showing his work. In spite of all his modesty, he deeply desired to become a respected photographer and artist. So, it was a great success for him when in March of 1977, he was asked to contribute some of his *Artist Portraits* to the very important exhibition *Medium Fotografie*, which took place between 4 December 1977 and 26 March 1978 in the Galerie Roter Turm in Halle. This event was particularly prestigious since the show was the first grand survey of German photo history in the GDR, and Borchert was the youngest participant, a framework that put him in the flattering position of being the contemporary culmination of a venerable artistic tradition.⁵²

On 15 May 1977, Borchert sent eight photographs to the organizers, including portraits of Werner Stötzer, Heiner Müller, Volker Braun, Charlotte E. Pauly, Max Butting, Elena Liessner-Blomberg, Christa Wolf and Gerhard Altenbourg.⁵³ On 28 July, he received an answer asking for additional, alternative image material since the director of the gallery, Hermann Raum, remembered to have seen «more varied pictures» in a previous exhibition.⁵⁴ On the backside of this typed letter, Borchert wrote down the contents of a 14 August phone call between him and Gerhard Ihrke, one of the curators of the show. According to Borchert's notes, Ihrke told Borchert that the curating committee was under the impression that he had chosen certain portraits as an expression of his attitude towards «certain people who are disagreeable». Borchert replied, «Indeed, it's about the people and about the good photo». In the course of the conversation, it becomes apparent that the committee – without saying it clearly – only wanted to include four of Borchert's suggestions and asked for replacements for the four others. Borchert's outraged commentary on paper (not on the phone) was the following: «So, sneaking around the hot porridge [beating around the bush, B.K.] and not being able to name things properly: They don't want to exhibit Chr. Wolf, Altenbourg, Liessner-Blomberg and Volker Braun. And then the constant excuses that these are all merely subjective opinions.» Finally, Borchert gave in again and replaced the unendorsed four with Erwin Strittmatter, Fritz Cremer, Wieland Förster and Wilhelm Rudolph.

It is unclear whether the Stasi was actually involved in this episode. Maybe the exhibition committee just anticipated potential political objections against certain people. In this case, however, the Biermann connection could not have been the only concern since the committee accepted Heiner Müller and Charlotte E. Pauly although they had signed the petition. In addition, the committee was willing to include Fritz Cremer who had also been amongst the original petitioners (before withdrawing his support a couple days later). Gerhard Altenbourg and Elena Liessner-Blomberg might have been excluded because of their formalist leanings (or in order to veil the politically motivated exclusion of Braun and Wolf). With its fuzzy contours, this

52 Cf. A. Hüneke et al. (eds.), *Medium Fotografie*, Leipzig 1979, 212–215.

53 SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 2238 (1).

54 SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 2238 (2).

internal controversy neatly illustrates the diffuse but toxic effects of censorship. Beyond that, it is interesting to see that Werner Schmidt's selection for the Dresden Kupferstich-Kabinett in early 1977 included not only the four artists banned from the show in Halle but also another twelve Biermann supporters – next to a prominent phalanx of detractors. Apparently, Borchert's strategy of camouflage by virtue of balancing friend and foe was also useful for the museum; Schmidt was thereby able to acquire portraits of artist who were labelled as dissidents.

4. Conclusion

Looking back at the genesis, distribution, and reception of Borchert's early *Artist Portraits*, it is evident that from the very start, his project was driven by his desire to deviate from the predominant official photographic practice and pictorial language of the GDR. The conditions of his project include working as a freelancer, without commission, choosing the subject and form of his endeavour by himself, focusing on and siding with artists (and not workers or farmers), trying to find an alternative to the phony optimism and the smooth glossiness of journalistic imagery, finding inspiration in pictorial models (Irving Penn) that were not officially endorsed, pursuing a «bourgeois» micro-sociological interest in social situations, and attempting to involve the beholder in an intense dialogue with his potentially uncomfortable images. All of this, however, did not mean that Borchert wanted to withdraw into a private niche and to work solely for himself or for a tiny audience. On the contrary, he was constantly looking for possibilities to publicize his images and thus spur the public debate on their form and content. Most of all, at this early point, he aspired to be perceived as an autonomous artist, a conceptual auteur with great formal skills and with a recognizable personal style.⁵⁵

I would not argue, however that Borchert restricted his ambitions to the artistic sphere. He also wanted to create images that would transcend the realms of mere representation and formal mastery in order to create a virtual re-enactment of a social situation. It was his goal to render the makers of art visible and to shape their image as eccentric individuals who withstand and return the intrusive gaze of the beholder. By showing them in their private (or at least self-chosen) confines, he created a pictorial interface between the intimate spaces of creativity and the larger realm of public attention. And this interface disrupted the pre-stabilized harmony between the ideal world of the image and the allegedly ideal world of «actually existing socialism» as it was prevalent in GDR photojournalism. Instead of reaffirming the beholder, it was intended to bother and question him or her. Borchert's portraits

55 Already in 1980, however, he distanced himself from the strict formal ambition of his earlier pictures: «I don't want to capture the essence by virtue of a conscious arrangement any more but in

fleeting, random constellations [...]» Interview Pachnicke / Voigt, SLUB, Mscr. Dresd. App. 2802, 2115 (7).

finally revealed their full disruptive potential when they picked up the resonance of the unprecedented public outcry against Biermann's expatriation and worked as visual amplifiers of the protest. This is where Borchert's images, unintentionally at first, crossed the line that divides a rhetorical gesture of autonomy from a concrete political demand made in public. This claim for open criticism and the freedom of expression was the ultimate provocation for a regime that made all its important decisions behind closed doors.⁵⁶ Borchert's presentation of the petitioners in public spaces must have seemed like a pictorial reiteration of their requests. From their living rooms, bedrooms, balconies and gardens, these artists mutely spoke to an audience who was more than ready to receive their message.

56 Cf. J. Judersleben, «Ich muss es vielen Leuten sagen». Casus belli: Öffentlichkeit», in: Berbig et al. (eds.), *In Sachen Biermann*, 29–43.

ABSTRACT

Face to Face:

Christian Borchert's *Artist Portraits* from 1975/76

The *Artist Portraits* from 1975/76 were Christian Borchert's (1942–2000) first great project as a freelance photographer. For almost two years, Borchert travelled the GDR in order to take the likenesses of about 200 artists (painters, sculptors, writers, composers and film-makers). He finally presented a good number of them in two much-noticed Berlin exhibitions in the fall of 1976. This article investigates the aesthetic, social and political implications of Borchert's complex project, which so far has never been subject to detailed scholarly analysis. It demonstrates how Borchert, working in a totalitarian system, which attempted to socialize, profile and control public discourse, made use of photography as a medium of negotiation between the private and the public, between individual aspirations and official ideals, and between art and politics.

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